The New Face of Government

By Tim Howell
IT Analyst, City of Hutto

A new wave of social interaction has washed ashore incredibly efficient ways to communicate with constituents and market our cities. People are taking in more and more information every day, and they are doing so in ways that support their busy lifestyles. With the use of social networking and other Web 2.0 tools, individuals have the ability to stay informed and communicate more effectively, allowing them to keep up with their busy lifestyles in a way that was much more difficult in traditional methods. Cities should seriously consider this technology as a tool to build relationships and connect with citizens in ways that would have been incredibly resource-intensive in the past.

A number of cities have started getting involved in this space, whether they know it or not. Cities are using free video streaming Web sites to promote activities and

According to Wikipedia, "Web 2.0 refers to web development and web design that facilitates interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Examples of Web 2.0 include web-based communities, hosted services, web applications, social-networking sites, wikis, blogs, mashups, and folksomonies. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites, where users are limited to passive viewing of information that is provided to them."

programs. They are using blogs to discuss hot items and get feedback from the community. They are using social networking Web sites to connect with constituents, provide real-time information, and keep in touch with what is going on in their cities.

One city that has become involved in social networking is the City of Hutto. Located 25 minutes northeast of downtown Austin, Hutto is one of the fastest growing cities in the state and currently has a population of approximately 17,500. In 2000, the population was just over 1,200 people, and the boom in growth is requiring the city to look for ways to effectively communicate across all media to stay in line with the city's vision. Hutto was an early adopter of social networking and Web 2.0 technologies to help communicate and better serve these diverse constituents.

Twitter: Twitter.com/HuttoTX

The City of Hutto first got involved with Twitter approximately one year ago. The goal was to provide real-time information on city programs and events. At first, the city did not produce much information. The city set up a search for anyone who sent out an update (tweet) with the word "Hutto" included and began to follow people who appeared to be Hutto residents. The city sent out press releases and added icons to the city Web site to increase the user base. Now the City of Hutto has more than 350 followers and often has information re-sent (re-tweeted). It is difficult to estimate how large the city's reach is, but

After using Twitter for only a couple of months, I remember getting an amber-alert and sending out the information on Twitter. Within minutes, other cities throughout Texas had re-tweeted the information to their network of followers. While this was not the reason the missing child was recovered, the ability for the information to reach so many people so quickly was incredible.

for the limited resources required to maintain this service, it is undoubtedly one of the most cost-effective outreach programs Hutto has.

Facebook: Facebook.com/HuttoTX

The City of Hutto created a Facebook fan page shortly after getting involved with Twitter. In the same way it uses Twitter, the city uses the Facebook page to promote events and programs. The city also posts pictures from events and more detailed information on the Facebook page. In addition, Hutto uses RSS technology to pull news and calendar events from the city's Web site on to the Facebook page automatically. Also, links are provided to all the features in the city's online help center directly from the Facebook page.

The city does not spend a lot of time managing the Facebook page because most of the content is collected automatically from the city's Web site and Twitter feed. Commenting has been turned off and there are no active discussion boards, because the city does not have staff resources available to monitor content that is created by other Facebook users. Essentially, the Facebook page is another way to get to the city's services and provide information to a market of users who might not be reached through traditional methods.

Other Web 2.0 and Social Networking Initiatives

In addition to Facebook and Twitter, the city uses two more online resources to reduce costs and reach a wider range of constituents. The city publishes all its online video content through the popular video streaming service, YouTube. Also, the city has created a Flickr group for sharing photos and a blog for the mayor to provide information to the city. All these services are free to the city and simple to administer.

Involvement

Twitter and Facebook are the fastest-growing online communities available. As of September 2009, according to statistics released by Facebook, there were more than

log on every day. Twitter does not release any statistical information, which makes it difficult to tell just how many active users Twitter currently has. Both platforms are being marketed on new cell phones and laptops, and Microsoft currently has a beta product that integrates Twitter feeds into its search engine. People are becoming more and more familiar with the networks and the terms that surround them. These platforms are slowly becoming the new forums for dialog, and it is up to cities to make sure that they are involved.

Encourage employees to get involved in these online communities, just as you would encourage them to get involved in other community activities. Use these social networks as marketing tools to talk about how great your city is. Monitor these areas for information that can help city leaders make better decisions and address concerns before they get out of control. There are a lot of concerns about legal liability, as with any new technology. But the same rules apply across all means of interaction, and the more you get involved, the clearer it will all become. ★

Sample tweet: @jsfs says, "The City of Hutto has a Twitter feed. Check it out at @HuttoTX."